Mutual Aid:
The Farmers' Holiday Association

By Jennings Mergenthal

Introduction

The Famers' Holiday Association was a grassroots mutual aid and advocacy organization from 1932 until its dissolution in 1937.

Inspired by the Bank Holiday movement (planned closures of banks on a statewide basis and then a national basis in 1933) intended to prevent bank runs they fought for economic rights for farmers across the Midwest and Great Plains. The Association was organized on a county and state level, but never successfully mobilized a national movement. This does not mean, however that their tactics were ineffective.

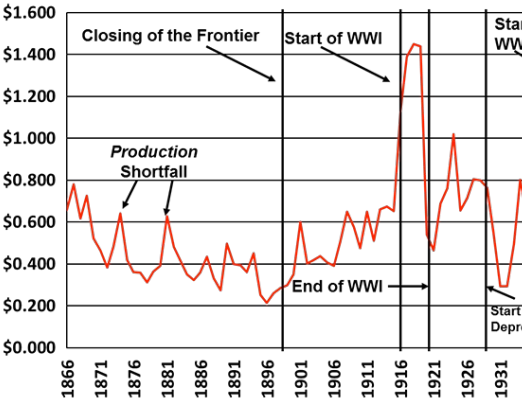
Farmer Labor Party Banner, ca 1925. Wikimedia Commons.

For formation of the FHA came out of decades of anti-establishment rural populism. Feeling excluded by the two party system many farmers organized alternative political parties often with explicitly socialist, communist and populist bents. Two of the most successful of these were the Nonpartisan League in North Dakota and the Farmer Labor party in Minnesota, which either controlled the state governments or served as the primary opposition to the Republicans from the 1910s through the 1930s.

There was also a financial component. Crop prices skyrocketed during and after World War I, as shortages in Europe led to increased demand. Many farmers took out loans to expand and mechanize their farm operations. This meant that when crop prices cratered in the early 1920s, many farmers were no longer turning a profit. This left farmers already in debt by the 1929 stock market crash and beginning of the Great Depression.

Front page of the Nonpartisan Leader, the NPL newspaper.
Library of Congress

The 1920s were also a national tipping point. During this decade, the United States shifted from having a majority of residents living in rural areas to having an urban majority. Farmers nationally began to see their interests losing power.



PLACEHOLDER, Corn Prices 1897-1943, Agricultural Policy Analysis Center

The largest family farm advocacy group, the Farmers Union had been founded in 1902, but many began to feel its establishment tendencies did not represent the interests of middle class farmers and formed a radical offshoot: The Farm Holiday Association.

About Farmers

At the time there was skepticism that farmers could be organized into a mutual association of this sort. One primary difference between farmers and union members is competition. Even within a collaborative community farmers are often in some level of direct economic competition with their neighbors.

The Landers Family on a thresher, North Dakota ca 1925. If you couldn't afford to own thresher, you might rent one for threshing. Wikimedia Commons

Another challenge was the vastly different scale of farmers, some of whom farm for subsistence and other who run a mechanized operation. This compounded with difference between the logistics of farming. Farmers with animals have to pay to feed and maintain them. Grain farmers must pay to rent or lease equipment like tractors or combines. Some farmers rely on selling their goods to grain elevators or creameries for processing. Crop prices are also not uniform, if you grew hay, you could sell it for much more than alfalfa. While these discrepancies would prove difficult for the FHA in the long term, by the early 1930s, most farmers were suffering enough that they felt a shared struggle.

The Association

The charismatic leader of the FHA was Iowa farmer Milo Reno, a colorful and talented orator.

The FHA began in Iowa, and advocated for organized collaboration between farmers. In particular in the form of local farm strikes or "holidays." The Depression meant that the production of most farm goods was not exceeding the cost of production, and even the act of bringing a product to market meant a financial loss.

Utilizing the slogan "**Stay at Home-Buy Nothing-Sell Nothing**." the FHA advocated for members to withhold their goods from the market, increasing the demand (and therefore the price.)

Members of the FHA signed cards and paid dues, and elected leadership of county and statewide chapters and supported a variety of actions that we will explore in the following pages.

Milo Reno, Courtesy Council Bluffs Public Library

"Let's call a Farmers' Holiday,
A Holiday let's hold.
We'll eat our wheat and ham and eggs,
And let them eat their gold."

A popular FHA slogan.

Local Holidays

Holidays in Sioux City, Iowa and Omaha, Nebraska would last for a few weeks in August and September.

Some farmers advocated that instead of selling their goods, they should be donated to the Bonus Army, a group of more than 40,000 servicemen and their families encamped in Washington D.C. to demand financial relief and the early payment of a bonus that had been technically paid to them but that they could not cash until 1945.

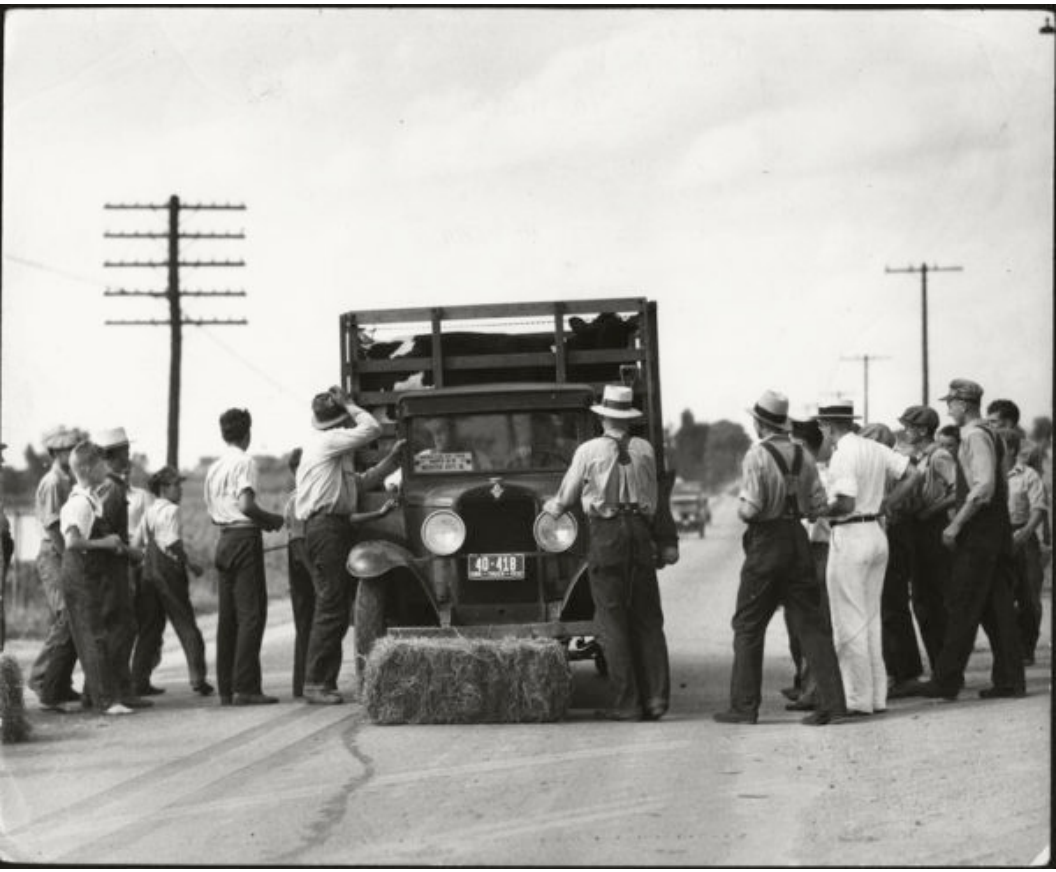
Though a powerful show of support, the Holidays were often undermined by non-participatory farmers. If you were on Holiday and not taking your goods to market, that meant that your neighbor could do so without any competition.

While food systems were far more localized than they are today, it was also possible in some places to bring additional food by rail to supplement local shortages.

Editorial Cartoon on the front page of the August 10, 1932 edition of the *Iowa Union Farmer*. University of Iowa Libraries.
I promise I tried to find a higher definition version.

Blockade

As the voluntary holidays were undermined, FHA members began to force compliance. They blockaded the roads to prevent the goods from coming to market. Initially the Iowa FHA members blockaded Sioux City, Boone and Council Bluffs. This helped galvanize action across other states, similar actions followed in Minnesota in the towns of Montevideo, Worthington, Moorhead and the Twin Cities, in Omaha, Nebraska and in other transportation centers across the Midwest. These actions were most effective in the fall during the harvest, when farmers had more goods that they could withhold from market.



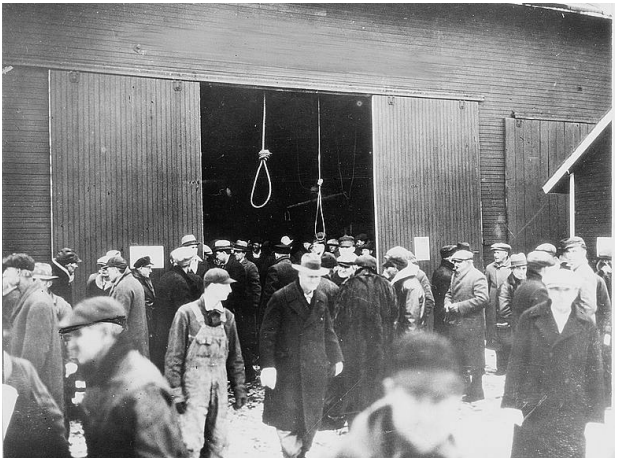
Iowa Blockade, 1932. Iowa Historical Society

Destruction of Goods

One of the most visually striking actions of the FHA was the destruction of goods. Crops like corn were burned in the stove in place of wood. Dairy farmers who sold their milk to be bottled were less impacted by the price decreases, since they did not have to pay to process their milk. Dairy farmers who relied on creameries to process their milk into butter and cheese however took deep financial losses. As the milk was not stable for long term storage the way grain would be, many farmers simply dumped their milk, or tainted it with kerosene so it could not be consumed. In Wisconsin, where dairy production is high, FHA affiliates formed another radical offshoot, the Wisconsin Cooperative Milk Pool, which would continue to operate for decades.

Farmers dumping milk, Wisconsin Historical Society.

Penny Auctions



A penny auction in Michigan, 1936.
Library of Congress.

Also known as one-cent auctions, this tactic was used heavily but not exclusively by the FHA. After a foreclosure, the farmer's property would be auctioned off. In a penny auction, community members stood silently in solidarity refusing to bid and allowing the farmer to repurchase their property for pennies, or purchasing and returning the property to the farmer and depriving the bank from profiting off of the foreclosure. In some cases, like the above image, farmers would use make heavy implications for what would await those who violated the spirit of community solidarity. This also put pressure on the bank and law enforcement personnel, serving both official roles but sometimes hesitant to go against the will of their communities.

Penny auction at the Von Bonn family's farm outside of Elgin, Nebraska, October 6, 1932. Allegedly the first penny auction.
University of Nebraska Archives.

Actions: Marches

The FHA was also quite politically active, particularly as it grew out of the Farmers Union, itself a political advocacy group. The FHA mobilized members to rally at state capitols, arguing for statewide moratorium on farm foreclosures. Twenty-five states, (and all Midwestern states except Indiana) eventually passed statewide moratoria ranging from a few months to four years, in no small part because of the threat of organized unrest if they failed to do so.

Following statewide successes, the FHA sought a grander goal. They would pursue a national farm foreclosure moratorium (with the precedent of the four day national bank holiday in March of 1933) by threatening a national farm holiday.

Farmers from Grant County, Minnesota join a march to the state capitol, 1935. Minnesota Historical Society.

Actions: Vigilante Justice

Iowa passed a mortgage moratorium on February 8, 1933. On April 27, in Le Mars, Iowa a group of more than a hundred farmers entered the courtroom of District Court Judge Charles Bradley and demanded he halt foreclosures. When the judge refused, the farmers forcibly dragged him out of the courtroom and a truck where he was driven outside of town, beaten and covered in oil and sand. When he still refused to halt evictions, the farmers threatened to hang him, eventually leaving him to walk back into town.

This inflamed an already volatile political situation, and made national news, including the front page of the New York Times. Martial law was declared in the county and more sympathetic press coverage shifted to declaring that the farmers had gone too far.

Though the national FHA denied official involvement, the president of the local FHA chapter was one of the 86 men arrested following the incident, and the movement would never fully shake the negative ties.

Below: New York Times front page headline, April 28, 1933.
Bottom: Le Mars Semi-Weekly Sentinel headline, May 2, 1933.

Iowa Farmers Abduct Judge From Court, Beat Him and Put Rope Around His Neck

Le Mars Semi-Weekly Sentinel

VOL. LXIV NO. 35 LE MARS, IOWA, TUESDAY, MAY 2, 1933 Published Tuesdays and Fridays

MARTIAL LAW REIGNS IN COUNTY

ELEVEN MEN | LAUDS PERSONAL COURAGE | STATE GUARD | Weather Outlook | MILITARY IN | FIRE AT MARCUS | START RIOT IN

Action: A National Holiday

Reno and the FHA planned their national holiday for May of 1933. A few weeks before it was due, the holiday was called off following passage of the Agricultural Adjustment Act, a major agricultural reform. Farmers hoped that this would naturally be followed by their desired national foreclosure moratorium. When it was not, the FHA tried in vain to revive the national holiday, but the movement had irrevocably lost momentum. While some FHA members still struck in the fall on local levels, (most visibly in Wisconsin) the organization never again captured widespread support or engagement. While some tactics of the FHA would continue, the organization itself dissolved after the death of Milo Reno and rejoined the Farmers Union in 1937.

FDR signs the Agricultural Adjustment Act, 1933.

Milk seized from trains by farmers and dumped, 1933.Wisconsin Historical Society

Evaluation and Analysis

The Farm Holiday Association served as an effective outlet for the frustrations and desperation of many Midwestern farmers facing financial ruination. While the decentralized, stochastic organizational structure allowed sudden and powerful actions, maintenance of those actions were less regimented and the movement was unable to find broader national direction. The competing needs and class status of dairy and grain farmers made agreement on tactics difficult. Many creameries did not support the Holidays and undermined the actions by continuing to process goods.

Another sea change was the presidency of FDR. The AAA, followed by the Emergency Farm Mortgage Act relieved the immediate financial crisis facing many middle class farmers, and killing their appetites for dramatic or violent actions. Indeed, the rural populist frustration of the FHA and its predecessor organizations became a key part of the New

FDR Marries the Farm Credit Administration to the US Farmer

Deal coalition that would sweep Roosevelt to overwhelming victory in three more elections.

Interestingly, one of the lasting political successes of the FHA was their shifting of the Overton window in discourse around farm aid. The demands and platforms of the FHA made the policies of Roosevelt's leftist Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace much more palatable to Congress and the courts. While the FHA's goals did not necessarily come to fruition, their actions did benefit many farmers.

However, many small farms simply did not have sufficient financial reserves to survive the 1932 crisis. Iowa alone, one out of seven farmers went bust, and the remaining aid would benefit the middle and upper class farmers who had been able to survive. This trend would be continued and perpetuated in subsequent decades by the rise of commercial farms and agribusiness.

The FHA was able to provide action, direction and even a temporary sense of solidarity for the embodiment of American individualism: the farmer. Community solidarity was, and remains an incredibly powerful force, but it must actively be built. Farmers were able to organize because they were able to see people as their neighbors rather than their competitors.

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Cover image: The Spirit of ‘32 Scott Molloy Labor Archives

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